

Reflections on the Object Diasporas in Museums

Guest post by Mingshi Cui

Sitting atop a display stand at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), Boston, a wooden sculpture of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Guanyin, quietly receives admiration from museum visitors. This Guanyin sculpture, originally from a Buddhist monastery in China, was removed and sold in the early 1900s, and then became part of the MFA's Asian Collection. Now in the Art of Asia gallery room 274, with the same gaze of serenity and compassion once cast down upon the worshippers in the temple, it encounters museum visitors from different parts of the world who come to seek aesthetic pleasure and culturally diverse experiences.



The Bodhisattva of Compassion, Guanyin sculpture at the MFA, Boston
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The curator thoughtfully utilized various display technologies in the exhibition space to enhance the visitors' understanding and experience of the sculpture in its original context. The placement of the sculpture in relation to the visitors was carefully arranged to replicate its original position within the hall of the temple. And by pressing the button on the audio station between benches in front of the sculpture, visitors can hear the chanting of the Lotus Sutra Chapter 25, which believers commonly recite when worshipping Guanyin. However, the physical environment of the gallery and the overall narrative in the museum make it hard to restore the display of the sculpture to its original cultural context. The exhibition room was designed to illustrate the Song dynasty as the

golden era of Chinese aesthetics. Thus, being surrounded by different types of ceramics and scroll paintings in the same gallery space, the Guanyin sculpture was endowed with a new cultural function different from its original religious purpose.

Such objects in museums that have experienced histories of displacement are considered examples of “object diaspora,” meaning they have been forcibly removed from their originating contexts and dispersed to subsequent collectors and cultural organizations (Basu, 2011). The word “diaspora” describes a group of people who moved away from their homeland and have developed mixed cultural characteristics, influenced partly by their motherland and partly by the new environments they settle in (Clifford, 1994). Some diasporic migrations are the result of different degrees of violence or conflict, such as wars and the slave trade; in other cases, local political and/or economic instability prompt the forced movement (Sengupta, 2011; Macdonald, 1996). To be accepted by the local society, members of a diaspora adapt to local social norms and adjust their cultural behaviors, while preserving aspects of their cultural identities (Shibutani & Kwan, 2015).

In the case of object diasporas, they lack the subjective initiative to select which aspects of their previous cultural identity to carry into the new cultural environment. It is the individuals or organizations who receive the objects that create and constantly reconstruct the objects’ cultural identities and representations in accordance with the social values and knowledge structures of the new environment (Hoskins, 2006). A similar idea is also proposed by Pepper (2005), who suggests that objects that travelled from place to place “are the focus of makers and viewers in a repeated and changing manner across the chains of history and semiosis” (p. 340). This suggests that as the object diasporas travel and change possessors, they are imparted with new layers of interpretation given by people who evaluate the objects’ historical significance and representational meanings from diverse cultural perspectives. In a museum context, the methods by which object information is catalogued and presented are shaped by their overarching narratives, which adhere to the institutional framing of knowledge. This determines how and what story of an object can be delivered to the public (Kreps 2003).

Part of my research interest involves examining how object diasporas in museums with the same place of origin are classified and displayed differently based on the distinct criteria and missions of the organizations. Using the biographical approach to trace the social lives of displaced objects now held in cultural institutions like museums, I examine how a specific group of objects has been appropriated and integrated into various narrative strands within different social and organizational contexts; and how the objects’ diasporic journeys reflect the complex history of intercultural encounters between nations throughout history. For example, a group of Buddhist mural fragments from Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China, are displayed between the sections on “The Six Dynasties” and “The Tang Dynasty” in the Chinese art gallery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, highlighting the influence of ancient China through trade along the Silk Route. However, for museums like the Victoria and Albert Museum, the fragments from the same place of origin vividly represent the spread of Buddhism, whose art was influenced by the Hellenistic West, reaching China. While the historical records created by the initial collectors played a crucial role in shaping how museums reinterpreted these objects from a Western perspective, the museum’s departmental structure, categorization scheme, and overall curatorial plan for the galleries formed in different social and historical contexts also has influenced the reconfiguration of a fragment’s cultural identity in each museum.

In the current global context, museums are facing growing contention concerning their narratives of the provenance and acquisition histories of displaced objects. While it is timely to address the ethical concerns surrounding the museum's custodianship of the displaced objects, it is equally important to develop a better understanding of how interpretations of these objects are shaped, to identify the embedded cultural biases, and to explore effective interpretive approaches that can enrich such narratives. By doing so, the museums can function as a space where visitors can form critical reflections on the multiple interpretations of the objects and derive meaningful insight from the objects' complex diasporic history.

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